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Anorexia: The Cheating Disorder

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## Anorexia: The Cheating Disorder

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I wanted to pray. A part of me would not let myself ask Him for help. I did it to myself. God understood my confusion. I tried to figure out why it was happening to me, and how. It only happens to weak girls, girls who have no self-control, girls who are caught up with society's standards—not me. But was I one of them? It was happening to me, just like the cases I read about in magazines.

This is the first paragraph of an essay I received from a young woman purporting to describe her own experience with anorexia nervosa. Before I had finished reading one page, I suspected it was plagiarized. I cannot easily explain my hunch. Something canned about the writing, its confessional sentiment exactly like the cases in the magazines. I ran a quick search through the *Magazine Index* in the library and then through recent issues of *Teen*, *McCall's*, *Glamour*, and *Mademoiselle*. In a half-hour, I had six articles: "Anorexia Nearly Killed Me," "Starving Oneself to Death," "Starving for Attention," "Two Teens," "My Sister and I," and "One Teen's Diet Nightmare." I did not accuse the student of plagiarism on the evidence of this search, but I decided to talk with her before I would comment on or evaluate her paper. I guessed that in our talk she would reveal that she had copied her essay or in some other way falsified it. She did.

I am not inquiring here into the causes of plagiarism among students nor describing how teachers ought to respond to it. I am simply telling two stories in order to convey something of its perversity.

Several years before I received the anorexia paper, a student submitted a brief analysis of James Joyce's "The Dead." As I was reading it, the paper tripped some wire in my mind. It seemed both accomplished and incompetent, full of discontinuities like those in the following two sentences:

The physical movement of the main character, Gabriel Conroy, from a house in the western part of the city eastward to a hotel at the very center expresses in spatial terms his commitment to the ways and the doom of his fellow Dubliners. His spiritual movement westward, in our imaginative vision, symbolizes his supremeness of that doom through recognition of its meaning and acceptance of this truth of his inward nature.

Much of the first sentence here is sensible; the character's physical movement expresses his commitment. It is also syntactically sophisticated. The grammatical subject, "movement," is sustained through five prepositional phrases before its meaning is completed by the verb "expresses." The verb itself is mod-

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ified by a prepositional phrase ("in spatial terms") that parallels and reiterates the adjective "physical." The second sentence, however, is nonsense. The grammatical kernel (movement symbolizes supremacy) is unintelligible. The pronoun sequence creates nothing but blur (his-our-his-that-its-this-his). One sentence, then, is substantial and coherent. The next is gummed with vagueness. So stark is the contrast between the two that it was difficult for me to imagine the same person writing both.

When I had assigned the paper, I explicitly restricted the use of secondary sources. I asked students to select a short reading from the literature we had been studying and to write an essay defining and explaining what they considered its central aesthetic purpose. I asked them to write about the work only as it presented itself to them in their reading. They were not to read or refer to any critical or historical background discussions of it.

In spite of the assignment's restriction, however, parts of this student paper about Gabriel Conroy seemed to me surely to have been copied. I scanned several library collections of critical essays on Joyce, browsed in longer works that made reference to *Dubliners*, and then, without having found anything but still persuaded the paper was plagiarized, asked the student to come to my office to talk with me.

"Before I give you credit for this paper," I said, "I need to ask a couple of questions: Did you use any outside materials when you wrote this? Did you read any books or articles about Joyce or about this story?"

To both of these questions he answered, "No," simply and firmly. But the look on his face was perplexed, and I realized once again how difficult it is to confront plagiarism without proof, how important it is not to accuse a student of cheating without sufficient cause. I hurried to soften the impression that I thought he had cheated by saying that my reason for asking was the strange inconsistency in the paper between specific recounting of the story line and abstract discussion of thematic issues. I was trying to understand the combination, I said, and I thought that perhaps he had looked at some outside sources which had influenced what he wrote. He still looked puzzled, but said, "No," again, and our brief conference ended.

Plagiarism irritates, like a thin wood splinter in the edge of one's thumb. With any sort of reasonable perspective, I realize that one student's possibly copying part of one paper on James Joyce is a small matter. In a typical semester, I teach 120 students and read perhaps 600 student papers. In a typical day, I have two classes to prepare and teach, committee meetings to attend, conferences with individual students, the utility bill to pay, a child to pick up from a Cub Scout meeting. But everything I touch rubs the splinter in my thumb and sets its irritation pulsing. As much as I try, I cannot ignore it.

So when I happened to be sitting in a colleague's office, waiting for her to finish a phone call, my eye seized upon the book of Joyce criticism on her shelf. I had to look. It took only a moment. The phrases of the student's jumbled sentences were everywhere. I borrowed the book, took it back to my office, double-checked its lines with the lines of the paper, and then went again to the library.

I wanted to verify that our library collection contained the book and thus that it had actually been available to the writer. It was checked out. "To whom?" I asked. The circulation clerk said that library policy prohibited his divulging that information, but if I wished I could have the book recalled. I did, and reconciled myself to waiting several days for it to arrive.

In order to make the story complete, I have to explain some of the mixture of my feeling during this episode. Though I should not have had time to play detective, I made room among all the duties of my life to pursue this student. I was thrilled by the chase. When I happened on those sentences in my colleague's office, I was exhilarated. They promised the solution to a puzzle that had eluded me. They reinforced my sense of judgment and my sense of self-satisfaction at the thought that, in a small way, I was preserving the integrity of the university.

I was also dismayed, however, and angry at what I came to feel as the obligation to play out this scene, at my exhilaration, at the student's distortion of our whole working relationship. When I thought about his voice, about his poise in denying that he had used any outside sources, I thought too about the other 119 students and wondered what his cheating meant about them. When I went into class in the following days and watched their faces, I realized that I had lost some of my faith in them. For no more reason than my experience with him, I found myself wondering what the rest of them had copied.

The recall notice came shortly afterward. I hurried to the library to pick up the book. When I could not find the sentences I was looking for, I first imagined that I had inadvertently recalled the wrong book. Then I thought that perhaps this was a different edition. I walked away from the circulation desk flipping the pages and wondering—through the electronic gate at the library door, out through the foyer past the philodendrons in their huge pots, onto the columned porch—and then I saw it. The gap in the pagination, page 98 followed immediately by page 113, and, in the fold of the binding so neatly done as to be almost invisible, the seven razor-bladed stumps.

He still denied it, first in my office, then in the Dean of Students' office, sitting with his legs crossed in an upholstered armchair next to a whirring tape-recorder. He began by denying that he had even used the book, then that he had damaged it in any way; he went so far as to say that he had noticed the missing pages and reported them to the library himself. He hadn't wanted to be blamed, he said. What kind of person did we think he was, he asked, how did we suppose he had been brought up? He was offended at the very thought of it. But when I finally left the hearing room, he admitted to the Dean both that he had copied and that he had cut out the pages he had used. Within the week he was suspended from the university.

Nearly every year I encounter students who cheat in their writing. Their stories are all different, and all the same: they were worried about their school work, rushed, unclear about the assignment, afraid. My stories are all different, and all the same: an intuition, some feeling on the surface of the page, something about the dye of the ink that whispers this is counterfeit currency; the excitement of judicial self-satisfaction, the slanderous suspicion that all students are cheating. Though particularly vivid, my experience with the *Dubliners* paper is

like all the others, obsessive and bilious. Like all the others, it has nothing whatever to do with what the job of teaching should be.

"Did this really happen?" I asked my student when we met to talk about her essay on anorexia. She was already nodding yes when I thought that I shouldn't seem rude in my disbelief. "I mean," I said, trying to make the edge of my question sharp, "I mean, did this happen the way you tell it here?"

"Yes," she nodded again. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I don't know exactly." I looked up from the paper at her face, then back down to the typed page. "It's sort of vague in places, as if . . . I don't know . . . as if you didn't remember what happened in your own story."

Now she was shaking her head. "I don't know what you mean."

She played the correct gambit—my move, force me to commit myself. But I didn't want to move yet. I was after proof, and I needed to go after it slowly. This was a parody of a writing conference. I was asking her about the details of her story, trying to appear helpful, as if I were attempting to help her revise, when in fact I was trying to tease out the insincerity of her paper.

"I mean, I'm sort of confused by your essay," I said. "In the part here on page three where you say you ran to the bathroom to vomit—I would run to the toilet to vomit, screaming the entire way' and 'The vomiting ceased after awhile'—when did that happen? Did that happen before you went to the hospital or after?"

"After."

"And here where you say, on page two, that your father stroked your hair and rubbed behind your ears, and then on the next page you say that your father was a monster who yelled at you and forced food down your throat constantly. Are you talking about what caused your anorexia or what happened afterward?"

She didn't answer this question at all, just sat there looking at me; so I tried a different tack.

What struck me as I read and reread her paper were the seams, the joints, where the parts were pushed together with no bonding. She is lying in a hospital bed staring at the ceiling tiles. She is trying to listen to the doctor talk to her. She is using and abusing a whole series of diet plans. She is flipping through a magazine looking at the pictures of models. She is taking a laxative every night before she goes to bed. She is listening to her father tell her that she is going home.

The effect on me was two-fold. I thought that the details she included were completely credible: only a person who had lain in a hospital bed would think to mark off the ceiling tiles; only a girl whose father actually rubbed behind her ears would think to mention that specific caress. At the same time, the vague and abrupt transitions between these highly individual details seemed to me understandable only if I assumed that she had copied them in fragments from a magazine memoir. My guess was that she had taken them from an article that was too long to copy in its entirety and so had included just selected parts in her essay.

"Did you write this?" I finally asked unexpectedly. I did not plan to say it like that, but I couldn't seem to approach the real point of my questions by just skirting the issue.

Her face looked so blank that I immediately switched to a different question. "Is this story really about you?"

She paused for a moment and then asked quietly, "What would happen if it weren't?"

I told her that I could not accept such a paper since the assignment was to write about a personal experience of her own. I told her, too, that it would help explain the vagueness I had been trying to point out to her: if she wrote the paper about someone else's experience, then she would be likely to leave gaps in the story that she couldn't fill.

"What grade would I get on it if it were about someone else?" she asked. To pin me down.

"I wouldn't grade it at all. I wouldn't give you any credit for doing it. It's not the assignment."

"OK," she said. "It's not about me. It's about a friend of mine."

My reaction to this admission was complicated. I had been expecting it, in fact working toward it, trying to get her to tell me where the paper had come from. I was glad finally to have its pretense uncovered but disappointed because I knew immediately that I would have to accept this substitute explanation though I didn't believe it either. I was sorry I had not been able to find the magazine story that provided the actual source of her paper and so would have to settle for this second lie about its roots. And I was angry at the whole situation: at the wasted time in the library, at the wasted conference with her, at my own inability to define the fakery of the piece, and at her apparent inability to see the purpose of our work together. I wanted her to write truthfully about her own experience and to use my responses, along with others', to help her convey the meaning of that experience more surely and vividly. As it was, her paper seemed just a hoax.

The deep flux of such feeling is just one of the dimensions for me of the problem of plagiarism. Another is the comic peculiarity of my claiming to be committed to helping students learn but sometimes spending large chunks of everyone's time trying to corner them in a fraud. Then there is the distance, the surprising separation I discover in such situations between myself and students. Because I assume their good will and candor and my own, both their cheating and my response to it shock me. I take for granted that we are working together and thus am amazed each time at the unimagined distance between us.

But even if I had expected the fakery of the anorexia paper, I would not have been prepared for what happened. Even if I had remembered the pages sliced out of the book of Joyce criticism and the self-righteous posturing of that frightened student writer trying to elude me, I would not have anticipated the journal of the woman who had told me that her essay on anorexia was not really about herself but about her friend.

I gave her a zero on the paper. She completed the rest of the semester's assignments, and at the end of the term, as required, she turned in a binder containing all her work for the course. As I was rereading her finished essays and the background notes and drafts she had made while working on them, I came upon the following entries in her journal:

Feb. 7. My roommates and I did watch the Miss America pageant. I believe pageants are my favorite programs to watch. They are so inspiring. But sometimes that can make you sick.

Feb. 21. The title of Miss America is such a distinguished title. Who ever is chosen for this honor represents the dreams of millions of young girls.

Feb. 22. My next paper I am writing about when I had anorexia. The thought of going all through that again scares me but I think it would be a good experience to write about.

Feb. 22. Skinny. Healthy. Slim. Muscle. Diets. Firmness. Roundness. All thoughts of women in today's society. Is this such a healthy attitude to have? Women can be obsessed with these listed thoughts to the point of worshipped, slimness, firmness, healthiness etc.—

Feb. 22.

. . . It really hurt.

"You're fat" my brother said to me.

I looked in the mirror.

You're fat I said to myself.

March 1. Blindness is a scary experience or at least it was for me. I haven't experienced blindness but something close to it. The world diminishes. Your only hope is through touch.

March 2. Scared and alone, I laid in my hospital bed. I wanted to pray. I thought prayer would make me feel closer to the only friend I had left. My situation had done this to me. I thought it only happened to weak girls, girls who have no self-control, girls concerned w/society.

These journal entries astonished and appalled me. Their sincerity was unmistakable. These were not descriptions of a friend's experience. These were not fragments copied from the pages of a popular magazine. They were threads of memory—a brother's teasing, a father's touch. As closely as I can reconstruct it, she and I met in conference to discuss her essay on anorexia nervosa March 12, eighteen days after she began writing it, thirty-three days after she had begun to remember in her journal about her feelings that led both to her sickness and to her writing.

What must she have been thinking as I began to ask her those strange questions in our conference? At what point did she catch a glimmer of what I was really doing there? And when she saw it—if she saw it—what must she then have thought about it all—the course, me, the whole project of learning in school? What calculation, what weariness with it all, must have led her to deny her own paper? "Is this paper about you?" I asked her.

"No," she said.

I did not mean for it to come to this.